

“Do You Hear What I Hear?”

Luke 1:5-25

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It was first recorded by the Harry Simone Chorale in 1962, soon after the words and music were written by Noel Regney and Gloria Shayne. It became a hit a year later when it was recorded by Bing Crosby as a single and then added to his 1963 Christmas album. Since then, almost twenty artists have released “Do You Hear What I Hear?” and made it one of our most popular Christmas songs.

This morning, I want to introduce my Advent sermon series with this song title. For the next four weeks, I want to examine the birth narratives by eavesdropping on conversations between the angels and some of the main characters in the nativity stories. Angels show up frequently in the Christmas story, bringing both good and alarming news to Zechariah, Joseph, Mary and the shepherds.

What did they say? How did those that heard them respond? What lessons can we learn from them as we travel through Advent this year? What do we need to be attuned to as we travel through this busy season?

Let’s begin this morning by listening to the conversation between the angel, Gabriel, and Zechariah. You will find it recorded in Luke 1:5-25.

Who was Zechariah? He and his wife Elizabeth were the parents of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus.

Luke tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth were good people that were devoutly religious. “Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly” Luke 1:6. No doubt their priestly heritage had a strong impact upon them. Zechariah was a priest serving in the temple and Elizabeth was a descendent of Aaron, the first Jewish priest.

Why do you think that Luke wanted his readers to know about their background and piety? Perhaps he did not want them to think that their inability to have children was punishment for anything they had done wrong, which was the prevailing mindset of that time. Neither God nor man could find fault with Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were honorable people.

Maybe Luke wanted his gentile readers to be aware of their faith’s Jewish roots. Theophilus and his gentile friends were struggling with the fact that the Jewish Christians were struggling to accept them. The bridges of reconciliation needed to be built, however, because of the significant role Judaism played in the Christian faith.

Could it be that Luke wanted to remind his readers that God turned to the simple and powerless to usher in an era of justice and mercy? There was no question that the visit by Gabriel to Zechariah and Elizabeth sent a strong message that God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

How did God use Zechariah and Elizabeth? He chose them to be the parents of the one who was to prepare the way for the Messiah.

How did they find out about this? It occurred by listening to the angel, Gabriel, while Zechariah was performing his priestly duties. He entered the temple to burn incense as was the daily custom of one of the priests. When he was alone in the Court of the Priests, Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and told him that he and his wife were going to have a son that would play a significant role in the Kingdom of God, preparing the hearts and minds of people so they would be receptive to Jesus’ leadership.

Understandably, Zechariah was stunned and asked Gabriel how this was possible since he and Elizabeth were old and apparently past childbearing years. He was assured that it would come

to pass and as a sign he would be unable to speak until John was born, which is exactly what happened.

May I share with you how this story speaks to me today? I am intrigued by Zechariah's inability to speak for almost a year. Some see this as punishment for unbelief. I struggle with this because who among us would not ask Gabriel the same question Zechariah did?

I see Zechariah's inability to speak as a sign that he was not delusional. Something happened while he was performing his priestly duties that would change his life forever. His prayers for a son were going to be answered in the coming months. This promise from God was real and this sign affirmed it.

Let's dig deeper. Was this God's way of showing Zechariah that it was not time for speaking, but listening, reflecting, praying and learning? I think so and find this quite common. What did Jesus do when he began his public ministry? He went to the wilderness to think, reflect and pray. What did Paul do after his conversion? He spent three years in Arabia meditating and reflecting upon his conversion experience. Now it was Zechariah's turn to listen, reflect, pray and learn. His future and ours demanded it.

Let's go a little deeper. I see something in the first chapter of Luke that must not be overlooked. In Luke 1, men are strangely quiet. Zechariah's voice was taken away and Joseph never speaks. The words of Elizabeth and Mary are the ones heard, recorded and remembered. As you know from your study of ancient cultures, this was highly unusual. For the most part, women were seen and not heard.

Why does Luke focus our gaze upon them and make their words immortal? Was he trying to tell us that Advent is a time for listening to voices that get drowned out at other times by the clamor of our culture's more powerful noises? Is it a time for listening to those that are normally ignored or discounted? I'm willing to consider it. Are you?

What did Elizabeth and Mary say that was so important that Luke quieted all other voices so we could hear them? They spoke of the kind of world they wanted for their children, a new social order based upon justice, compassion, humility, mercy, generosity, tolerance and peace. They offered a different vision of God, His dreams for mankind and His expectations of all people.

Evidently Luke considered their vision important. It must have described the kind of world he dreamed of, too.

This gives birth to a lot of questions, doesn't it? **On a national and global scale, whose voices are not being heard today?** Why can we not hear them? What do we need to do to make these voices heard?

How do we respond to people that offer new visions and dreams for healing our broken world? Do we listen with respect or attack, ridicule, discredit or ignore them? Do we invite them to participate in the public discourse? If not, I wonder what we are missing.

This fall, I have attended several interfaith meetings and engaged people of other cultures and religions in dialogue. These are reasonable people trying to tear down walls of hate and build bridges of reconciliation. Some are well known because they are authors and public speakers.

I have asked most of them the same question. Why are your voices not being heard and your message not getting out to the people? They offered two observations. Their voice is drowned out by extremists or ignored by the media. They keep speaking, though, planting seeds of understanding and goodwill, hoping they will grow. I encouraged each of them to be persistent and not grow weary in well doing. I also encourage you to listen for their voices and help them in their efforts.

Let's bring this down to the personal level. **In your life now, whose voices are you not hearing and why do you suppose you are not?** Is it God's, a loving family member, a dear friend, a teacher, a counselor or even a stranger's? What are they trying to tell you? What do you need to do to hear them?

Let me encourage you to do it. Find a way during this holy season to listen to the voices of concern, reason, goodwill, hope, affirmation, guidance, forgiveness and peace. Listen to the voices you have been unwilling to hear for whatever reason.

Listen if your world has been turned upside down and is spinning out of control. Listen if you are facing a challenge that is bigger than you are. Listen if you are traveling all alone down an unfamiliar road. Listen if you are confused and do not know what to do. Listen if you have lost your way. Listen if you are afraid.

Listen if trusted friends have turned out to be untrustworthy. Listen if you are angry and disillusioned. Listen if your family is in crisis. Listen if your heart has been broken.

Listen if your business is experiencing a downturn. Listen if you are struggling to pay your bills. Listen if your pocketbook is empty.

Listen if the God you created has let you down. Listen if your faith has been shattered. Listen if you are spiritually empty. Listen if you need to construct a new faith.

Listen if you have made mistakes and need to make changes. Listen if you need a new vision and dream. Listen if you have to bury old ones.

Listen if others are depending upon you for advice, direction and inspiration.

Listen to the voices that get drowned out other times of the year.

Zechariah did and when it was time for him to speak, he knew what to say. “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High. You will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace” Luke 1:76-79.

I have to believe that Zechariah’s wise counsel helped John understand his role in God’s plan for the ages, that he was not the Messiah, but the one who would prepare the way for him. How often did John recall these words as the crowds followed and pressured him to assume this Messianic role? What difference would it have made had Zechariah not been a good listener?

I know December is a busy month. It is a time for shopping, cooking, eating, socializing and worshipping. All of these are necessary and good. So is listening to the voices that, at other times, we may ignore or discount. Ask God to help you hear these voices and respond to them in ways that honor Him by building bridges of hope and reconciliation.

“Do you hear what I hear?” Do you hear what you need to hear and are you responding in ways that are good for others and you? Ask God to help you as you begin this Advent journey.